
Opinion

Editorial: Extending water lines around Coakley landfill is crucial

Posted Jan 28, 2018 at 3:01 AM

The city of Portsmouth and state of New Hampshire have an opportunity to do the safe and correct thing by extending municipal water lines to homes around the Coakley landfill Superfund cleanup site.

A \$236 million fund from a settlement with ExxonMobil over MTBE contamination, a gasoline additive, allows the state to make targeted investments to assure clean water supplies. How the state and Portsmouth move forward with extending municipal water lines along Breakfast Hill Road in Greenland will lay the groundwork for subsequent and similar projects around the state.

Expediting the project as quickly as is practical is the key. If the water line extension is necessary to provide safe water to residents, and the city, Greenland and state appear to believe that is the case, based upon requesting the money, then doing so quickly is paramount.

The last thing residents of Greenland and all others around the state need is for projects deemed necessary to take years on end to complete. Clearly, the water extension cannot be done overnight, but urgency should reflect the risk.

While there remains debate over the imminent threat posed to residential wells around the 27-acre landfill in Greenland and North Hampton there should be no debate over the failing remediation of the landfill.

Tests on monitoring wells at the landfill found PFASs and 1,4-dioxane, both suspected carcinogens, at levels above the Environmental Protection Agency's health advisory levels. Water samples taken from Berry's Brook in Greenland and Rye tested in some cases dramatically higher than the EPA's health advisory levels for PFCs in groundwater.

Portsmouth recently learned it will receive a \$200,000 grant from the state via the settlement fund to conduct a feasibility study on extending the lines. This follows Mayor Jack Blalock and Greenland Selectmen Chairman Vaughan Morgan last June sending a letter to the state seeking \$17.3 million for the extension project.

The study, according to Portsmouth Deputy Director of Public Works Brian Goetz, will further define where a water main could go, how it would be constructed and its cost. Goetz last week said he didn't know when the study will start because the city hasn't received the money yet. This portion of the project falls on state leaders to make sure the money is soon provided so what is deemed necessary can move forward.

The state’s congressional delegation on Friday sent a letter to the EPA pushing it to complete a deep bedrock investigation at the Coakley landfill as soon as possible to help determine how water and contaminants are flowing away from the site.

“The EPA must continue to work quickly to assess the conditions at the Coakley landfill site and ensure that the remedy at the site is protective of both short- and long-term health,” according to the letter to EPA Region 1 Administrator Alexandra Dunn.

The Coakley landfill has been a threat to the environment since the day officials decided to site a dump in a former quarry. The threat was continued when the ill-fated decision was made to pick a cheaper natural attenuation remediation, fancy speak for a cap that allows toxins to seep more slowly into the bedrock below over time. If the PFCs found in Berry’s Brook are evidence, the cap is not effectively working.

The bedrock study and any additional remediation, such as the pump-and-treat system originally proposed for the landfill, is second to the need to reduce the threat to humans by extending the municipal water lines. That is why all efforts should focus on expediting the extension. Doing so is step one is what is certain to be a multi-phased, years-long approach to putting in an appropriate remediation.

The Coakley landfill is not the only threat to drinking and groundwater around the state, but it may be the first project aided by the MTBE settlement money. Use of that money for the municipal water line extension is going to go a long way toward establishing how the MTBE fund is used. It is crucial to do it right and quickly.



SIGN UP FOR DAILY E-MAIL

Wake up to the day’s top news, delivered to your inbox

MOST POPULAR STORIES

◀ Previous

Next ▶